

**SPIRITUAL EDUCATION:  
NEW CHALLENGES, NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

**Final Report**

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# SPIRITUAL EDUCATION: NEW CHALLENGES, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

## Final Report

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### Overview and Rationale

The impetus for this collaborative research project on spirituality in education grew out of a desire by those involved to explore inclusive approaches to spiritual education in Ireland, North and South. Aware of the increasing religious and cultural diversity of young people on the island of Ireland and the challenges this has raised for religious education in particular, it was felt that there would be a benefit in investigating specific methods and pedagogical practices used to encourage spiritual development in young people whatever their religious or non-religious worldview.

Alexander and McLaughlin (2003) speak of two types of spiritual education – that which is ‘tethered’ to a particular denomination or religion and that which is ‘untethered’. Spirituality which is religiously tethered has ‘a particular framework of belief, practice and value and is aimed at the search for ‘purpose’ and ‘truth’ conceived in rather specific ways (as in the search for what is ‘ultimate’ or ‘sacred’)’ (p359). Alternatively, untethered spiritual education ‘can proceed from little more than an apprehension that there is something more to life than is apparent on its surface, and can be radically unstructured and open-ended’ (p359). What this simple dichotomy denotes is that spiritual education can be both inside and outside religion. To take this a step further, as some such as Hay (2006) have done, is to affirm that spirituality is an intrinsic part of the human person. This anthropological approach stresses that teaching about spirituality does not necessarily start from the theological categories of a religious system, or even from the historical expressions of the spiritual quest (though they may be manifest in both), but rather from the capacity for spirituality in every individual. This inclusive approach opens up the teaching of spirituality to cross-cultural and inter-religious contexts as has been shown by Hammond (1999), Hay and Nye (2006), West-Burnham and Huws-Jones (2007) and Johnson and Neagley (2011). Johnson’s (1999) study of the multiple ways in which educators define spirituality and apply it in their classrooms resulted in eight overlapping categories of definitions, including contemplative (or mystical); religious,

meaning-making, self-reflective, emotional, ethical, ecological and creative. In contexts which were focused less on the “religious” category she noted that, developing and employing ‘tools’ for spiritual education included methods such as sensory awareness exercises, arts experiences, nature based experiences and reflective practices. Thus, it seemed worthwhile to ask what challenges or opportunities an inclusive model of spiritual education employing such tools might create for teachers in classrooms in Ireland, North and South.

Within the context of a small-scale study it would not be possible to investigate a wide range of practices associated with inclusive spiritual education, so the main area chosen for this project was contemplative spirituality. This was identified as a particularly valuable focus for three reasons.

Firstly, because contemplative practices are being increasingly recognised as foundational to young people’s wellbeing (Kabat-Zinn 2001) and to building a just and peaceful society, (NGO Committee On Spirituality Values And Global Concerns - A Committee of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations)<sup>1</sup> the project seemed worthy from an anthropological perspective.

Secondly, because of the assertion by some writers that children find it increasingly difficult to make space for reflection and contemplation in their busy lives the project seemed worthy from an educational / philosophical perspective. Speaking just before his death, the Irish philosopher and poet, John O’Donohue, observed: ‘If you look at the educational system and you look at most of the public fora in our culture, there is very little time or attention given to what you could almost call learning the art of inwardness or a pedagogy of interiority.’ (O’Donohue, 2007)

Thirdly, the exponentially expanding educational publications on a wide range of specific and diverse methods in contemplative curriculum and pedagogy, now also commonly referred to as “mindfulness” education. (e.g. Greenland, 2010, Macdonald and Shirley, 2009, Shoerberlein, 2009 and Willard, 2010) merit review and evaluation in an Irish context. These approaches tend to emphasize expanding student capacities for: focused attention; acute sensory awareness; engagement with nature; attunement to internal rhythms; sensing and calming internal stress;

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.csvgc-ny.org/>

emotional regulation skills; and self-reflective and meditative thinking. (Johnson and Neagley, 2011).

For these reasons the core research question in our work became: *'What challenges and opportunities are there for spiritual development using contemplative practices such as sensory awareness exercises, arts experiences, nature based experiences, reflective practices or mindfulness meditation in educational settings in Ireland, North and South?'*

In recognition of Watson and Thompson's (2007) observation that the most crucial component of any programme of spiritual or religious education is the teacher, we decided to explore our question through the practice of a small number of teachers who were interested in receiving training in spiritual education as well as introducing components of it into their practice. It was also acknowledged that, in order to explore this question, we would benefit greatly from the expertise of others already well-established in this field, and so the aims and activities of the project were framed as follows:

***The aims of the project were:***

1. To transfer knowledge from international researchers regarding the increased competency in focusing attention, the improved maintenance of emotional balance and the enriched resilience in the face of life's challenges for children / young people who experience spiritual education.
2. To familiarise educators with contemplative practices that may provide a simple way to support the development of core emotional and social competencies that underlie successful learning and help students and teachers excel.
3. To introduce educators to an expert educator practitioner in the field of contemplative practices for children/young people.
4. To explore an inter-spiritual approach to intercultural and interfaith education in a North-South context.

*The main activities of the project were:*

1. To hold a training event for 12 teachers, from North and South of Ireland and from both Primary and Post-Primary sectors, led by an international expert in spiritual education. (Details of this event are provided below.)
2. To create an online repository of spiritual education materials for teachers using the Moodle VLE.
3. To encourage an evaluative and reflective approach to the practise of spiritual education through the provision of a structured learning journal.
4. To use the learning journals as a data source for qualitative research into the challenges and opportunities for contemplative spiritual education in schools in Ireland, North and South.
5. To publish the results of this data in a peer-reviewed journal.

**Recruitment of Research Participants**

In May 2011, flyers and application forms were distributed at the 'Spirit of the Child International Conference' in Waterford Institute of Technology and in various schools. 12 teachers were recruited through an application form process (see Appendix A) to participate in the research project. Every effort was made to invite teachers from a variety of educational sectors onto the project. One of the main stipulations in choosing a research participant was that they had a heterogeneous group of pupils; with some proportion of religious diversity in their classrooms.

Eight teachers from the south were selected and four from the north of Ireland. In the south, four primary school teachers were selected:

- 2 from a VEC Community National school
- 1 from an Educate Together school
- 1 from a Catholic National school

And four secondary school teachers:

- 3 from a Catholic Secondary school
- 1 from a VEC Community college.

In the north, two primary school teachers were selected:

- Both from a Controlled school

And two secondary teachers:

- 1 from a Voluntary Grammar girls' school
- 1 from a Controlled Grammar school

### **Methodology: Training Day by Prof Aostre Johnson**

The consultant for this project, Dr. Aostre Johnson, has studied the theory and practice of spirituality and education, as well as integrating these into schools for children and adolescents and teacher education programs, for many years. Most recently she has concentrated on the incorporation of contemplative or mindfulness practices into school curricula, the focus of this project.

The major challenge of this training was to condense the material into one short day, attempting to provide useful contemplative methods to teachers from both the North and the South, including both primary and secondary levels and a variety of subject areas. In addition, participants needed to understand the entire research project and learn how to gather data to be utilized by the researchers at the end of the study.

Thus, the day began with an overall introduction to the research project, the researchers, the consultant and the participants. Next, approximately three and a half hours was devoted to experiencing contemplative practices and learning how to lead them for children and adolescents. Finally, the training day ended with an hour devoted to data collection methods and on-line support for participants for the duration of the study.

Rather than focusing on narrowing the scope of the training to one or two contemplative methods, Dr. Johnson presented a wide range of possible approaches as a "menu" conducive to many contexts. In order to do this, she created a "contemplative practices manual" offering guidelines for a number of contemplative methods and then used this manual as the basis for many of the experiences throughout the day.

She began with the assumption, widely supported by the literature in the field (e.g. Miller, 1994; Napoli, 2004; Crane, et.al. 2010) as well as her own experiences that teachers can most effectively instruct their students in contemplative methods if they begin with their own daily practice.

Teachers were taught three basic types of practice (a basic mindfulness meditation, a breathe counting meditation, and a focused "mantra" meditation) and were invited either to select one of these or to utilize any contemplative/religious practice they were already familiar with, such as praying, chanting, tai chi or yoga, on a daily basis during the course of the study.

Dr Johnson then suggested basic guidelines for integrating contemplative practices into existing school curricula. These included creating a specific time for the practices, designating a clear signal or ritual to signify their beginning and ending; explaining to students the reasons for offering them; and encouraging students to discuss their experiences.

The final and most extensive part of the manual and training day was based on the "menu" of contemplative practices geared towards students, with relevant examples for the entire primary through secondary age span. These practices included:

- several types of body relaxation and movement practices
- several methods for basic breathing practices
- several variations of mindfulness meditation practices, several examples of guided meditation practices,
- a "loving kindness" meditation practice
- a walking meditation practice
- a wide range of sensory awareness concentration practices, utilizing the senses of taste, hearing, seeing, smelling and touching
- a basic poetry concentration practice
- several social-emotional practices
- a variety of nature based practices

Participants were guided to participate in and discuss many of these practices throughout the day; the manual offered basic guidelines for those not experienced.

The thematic findings section of this report demonstrates that the teachers who continued in the study did utilize many of these types of practice in their lives and classrooms. A second training day was arranged for January 21<sup>st</sup> with the intention of connecting with Prof Johnson by video-conference. However seven of the participating teachers pulled out of the day due to other commitments. Due to this reduction in numbers it was decided not to run a second training day.

## **Method of Research**

**Data collection:** Keeping a *Journal of Contemplative Practices* was the primary mode by which each teacher gathered, reported and reflected on the experience of introducing contemplative practices in the classroom. Data was collected by teachers providing responses, based on their journal entries, to the following questions.

### **Getting Started**

1. Identify a problem or a need which you hope will be addressed through the introduction of contemplative practices.
2. State which tools or techniques that you hope to use for your own practice
3. State which tools or techniques that you plan to employ with your students
4. For each technique, provide a description of why you have chosen it and how you hope to integrate its use within your work

### **Journal Analysis**

5. How often did you use the practices in your own life
6. What changes in your own life, if any, did you notice through using the practices
7. What changes, if any, did you notice about your interaction with students (individual or as a class)
8. What changes, if any, did you notice about the ways you approached your teaching.
9. What practices did you use with students?
10. How often did you use the practice(s) with your students?
11. How did you integrate these practices into your class?
12. What did you observe about students (individuals and / or group) as they engaged with the practices?

13. What effects did these practices have on students immediately after the practices and over time?
14. Do you feel that the use of the practices in any way addressed the problems or needs you originally identified?
15. Describe two (or more) significant incidents with your students that had a positive effect as a result of the practices used. If there was no positive effect, please state also.
16. Describe two (or more) significant incidents with your students when the practices did not work well.
17. If you were to do this again what would you do differently OR what advice would you offer another teacher about using contemplative practices in the classroom.

### **Data Analysis**

There was a 50% completion rate of the research task in terms of the number of contemplative learning journals that were returned to the researchers. It is interesting to note that all of the **primary school** teachers in the South returned the research journals and all commented on how they found it beneficial. One secondary teacher, from a VEC Community College, completed the research task and one from the North. No teacher in the secondary Catholic sector submitted the final journal.

Of the four teachers from the North who attended the training event, two primary school teachers and one post-primary teacher did not submit the final. These outcomes leave the researchers with a question whether these practices suit primary teachers better? Alternatively, the practices may be more useful for teachers in a multi-denominational setting, such as the VEC or Educate-together schools in the South. A third alternative is that teachers in post-primary and religiously affiliated schools could benefit from separate trainings that are tailored more specifically to their contexts.

Philip Bernard's method of Data Analysis in Qualitative Research (See *Nurse Education Today, Volume 14, Issue 2, April 1994, Pages 111-117*) will be employed to produce the final journal article on this research.

## Thematic Findings

**Introducing contemplative practices:** Before introducing the practices in the classroom, there was a felt need by the six teachers to develop a context in which the practices could be presented. Introducing intentional quiet time for calming and settling was the first step taken by five of the six teachers. The chime bar, a percussion instrument which consists of cylinders of solid metal of varying lengths mounted hanging from a bar which is played by sweeping a finger or stick through the length of the hanging chimes so as to produce a rising or falling glissando was particularly effective in setting the context for one teacher. Also, introducing the activities as “transitional” activities seemed to enable a more smooth entry into the educational experience they provided in contrast to setting the activity apart in a unique time slot from the outset.

**Types of Practices introduced to Students:** The training event provided the teachers with a great array of practices to draw from and the use of this variety was evident in the Journals that were kept by each teacher.

Creating Silence / Silent Time	Children are invited to “hear” silence; to settle into being at rest in themselves in a world without constant activity This was used for up to 5-7 minutes a maximum of four times per day Beginning of Day, After Break, After Lunch, Before End of Day.
Bringing the body into stillness	Listening to the sound of the student’s own heartbeat. Listening to the breath, feeling its movement and extended the sense of the alertness by using balloon breathing which deepens the level of breathing. Shaking the body so as to grow alert to the alertness of the body. Sun, starfish and seated mountain postures were also taught. Tai chi to music enabled the students to learn slowing down through meditative body movements.
BrainGym® exercises	The exercises from this website programme are based on the premise that all learning, including acquiring the skills of awareness and attentiveness, begins with movement. The programme was developed by Paul Dennison’s, a US public school teacher in a disadvantaged community by drawing on the philosophy of sensory-integration in the work of Maria Montessori.

Attuning to Nature, including cloud meditations	Because of the kind of world in which young people are growing up, especially the deep immersion in technology that is part of that world, some teachers chose to use exercises for awakening to the natural sounds smells, tastes. In particular, a cloud meditation was used whereby students breathed in a slowly and let any thought that came into their mind float away on the cloud.
Guided imagery	Guided imagery was used to build experiences such as contact with nature so that children could learn how to engage their imaginations to support creating contact with stillness and calm.
Creating a Mandala	The practice of creating a sacred mandala was introduced as a way for the class to come together and celebrate their unity, in gratitude for nature and all forms of life. In this way students were connected with the wider practice of global peace mandalas.
Music Mediation	While listening to the music, children visualized their bodies minds and inner spirits relaxing.
Reflective Journal	Students were introduced to reflective journals where they would describe or draw writing reflections on their own thoughts during guided reflections. The act of reflecting on the awareness in more reflective moments enables students to develop a sense of the stepping out of the present moment and attuning to their own wisdom about life.
JAM: Just a Minute Website	The just-a-minute website <a href="http://www.just-a-minute.org">http://www.just-a-minute.org</a> introduces students to the concept of mini-meditation and the possibilities in taking a step back when there is pressure to act in an impulsive manner
Body Scans	Body Scan meditations gave students instructions regarding how to be aware of bodily sensations, and so be more alert in their daily lives.
Freeze Frames	Freeze-frame exercise are based on the idea that, like movies, life is made up of up of a series of frames- strung together over time. When there is too much happening, it helps to stop the movie—or freeze just one frame. Make a sincere effort to shift your focus away from a racing mind to just one incident and bringing the student's best responses into the frame is liberating.

Sound Exploration	Since sound and music activities involve the whole child - the child's desire for language, the body's urge to move, the brain's attention to patterns, they can facilitate attentiveness at a deep, pre-speech level.
Auditory Concentration / Picture Focus	Because each student processes information in his/her own special way - visually, auditorily, kinesthetically, etc. or a combination, it was necessary to adapt focusing exercises so that different learning styles could be engaged.

**What happened for the teachers as they used and taught the contemplative practices?**

Two of the teachers responded in their journals that they did not practice these practices in their own lives very much. The remaining four teachers observed the following changes in themselves due to regularly practicing breath-work, meditation, listening to calming music and performing a body scan:

- Three reported feeling more relaxed and less stressed.
- Two reported that they were more patient with the children in their classes and in better humor overall.

Individual teachers commented that:

- They were more accepting of themselves and others;
- They noticed positive behavior in the classroom more;
- They were more present to those around them;
- They were more in touch with their own spirituality and had more appreciation of the natural world.

**What happened for the students as they learned contemplative practices?**

Most of the teachers noted that it took a few attempts before students were able to tune in to the practices, feel less self-conscious and get over their 'giddiness'.

Five teachers noticed that the contemplative practices resulted in:

- An atmosphere of peace and calm in the classroom.
- An improvement in the attention levels of the students and their ability to focus in class.

Two teachers reported a more positive atmosphere in the classroom and in how the children interact with each other and the teacher. One teacher commented that *"Students definitely favored*

*these practices over other school activities". Another teacher stated that the Mandala exercise with her class was "...one of the most powerful and peaceful experiences I've ever had in almost ten years of teaching".*

### **Recommendations**

- Some teachers stated that they found it difficult not to have continuing support after the one day workshop. Perhaps a handbook with a CD for teachers could assist teachers with their own use of the practices as well as how to teach them.
- Ideally, trainings could be divided by student age level (e.g. primary or secondary) so that they can be adapted more clearly to the needs of the teachers and students.
- It may also be beneficial to offer more specialised trainings to teachers in religiously affiliated schools.
- Trainings would be more effective if they extended over a longer period of time. The initial session should extend over several days. If possible, participants should have regular meetings (approximately once a month) by region, for discussion, ongoing training and support.
- From the level of engagement of the teachers on this research project, it seems that the practices offered were more suitable for primary schools, particularly those of a non-denominational or multi-denominational nature. In an Irish context, it may be wise to target these sectors with training and resources.

### **Ethical Considerations**

One teacher noted that Jehovah Witness parents may not wish to have such practices taught to their children. Children are then torn between what is happening in the classroom and what their parents require. This draws attention to the fact that no method of spiritual education is value free and that spiritual education, as well as religious education, should be characterised by transparency and allow for the right to withdrawal in accordance with human rights principles (see Mawhinney *et al*, 2010).

## **Concluding Remarks**

The project set out to explore what contribution contemplative education or contemporary sensory awareness exercises make to inter-religious classrooms and intercultural education. It sought to familiarise teachers with contemplative practices to use in the classroom as well as expose them to international research in this area. The teacher's responses to the use of the contemplative practices point to an increased awareness in pupils, a calmness and an atmosphere of increased positivity and consideration for one another. Teachers will need to be sensitive to the particular religious/secular make-up of the families of the children that they are teaching. Some practices are quite acceptable to all religious traditions while others are more accepted in one tradition or another. Longer training sessions would allow teachers to understand which methods might be considered more controversial for certain religions. Methods could then be tailored by school populations.

A specified aim of this research project was the writing of an article for a peer-reviewed journal and, at the time of writing this report, this aspect of the project is not yet completed. The team looks forward, therefore, to exploring the data and literature in more depth in order to draw out further insights and conclusions, especially around the themes of health education, inter-religious education and inter-cultural education.

## **Acknowledgements**

The research team wishes to acknowledge the financial support of SCoTENS, and the support of Stranmillis University College, Marino Institute of Education and All Hallows College. We also wish to thank Professor Aostre Johnson for her expertise and insights throughout this research project. We are indebted to the teachers for their positive and expert engagement with the project's objectives. Thanks are also due to the students in the classrooms for their equally positive engagement and contributions.

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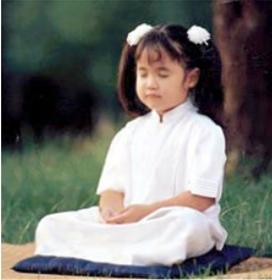
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## Appendix A

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### *Are you interested in nurturing the spirituality of your students?*

This research project is seeking teachers who are interested in an opportunity to explore Spiritual Education from an inter-spiritual perspective. It will examine what contribution contemplative education or contemporary sensory awareness exercises make to inter-religious classrooms and intercultural education.

#### **Aims of the Project:**

1. To transfer knowledge from international reserachers regarding the increased competency in focusing attention, the improved maintenance of emotional balance and the enriched resilience in the face of life's challenges for children and young people who experience spiritual education.
2. To familiarise educators with meditation practices that may provide a simple way to support the development of core emotional and social competencies that underlie successful learning and help students and teachers excel.
3. To introduce educators to an expert educator practitioner in the field of contemplative practices for children and young people.
4. To explore an inter-spiritual approach to intercultural and interfaith education in a North-South context through situating exchange in shared practices.

#### **Training Workshop**



The project is seeking a group of teachers, from both primary and secondary level, who will attend a training workshop on Spiritual Education with Dr Aostre Johnson. You will then try these practices in your classroom and keep a journal of your findings and insights. A second workshop is organised for feedback and a discussion of your experiences.

This is an opportunity to work with **Dr Aostre Johnson** of St Michael's College, Vermont. Aostre is coordinator of a Spirituality in Education Program and she has published widely in the area of creativity, multiple intelligences and spirituality as they relate to human development and education. Her area of expertise is the study of spirituality in education and she is editor of a recent book, *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*.

#### **Training Workshop**

**Date: Saturday, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2011**

**Venue: Stranmillis University College, Belfast**

If interested in being part of this research project, please fill out the application form over-leaf.

## Application Form

Name:

School:

School Address:

Class / Subject:

Email:

Phone Number:

**Why do you wish to participate in this research project?**

**Closing Date for application: Friday, June 17<sup>th</sup> 2011**

Please return to:

Aiveen Mullally,

Marino Institute of Education,

Griffith Avenue, Dublin 9

Email: [aiveen.mullally@mie.ie](mailto:aiveen.mullally@mie.ie)